Ind State Parks

McCORMICK'S CREEK CANYON

HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

Department of Conservation
State of Indiana
1923

McCORMICK'S CREEK CANYON

A HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

Divisions of Land & Water

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Dripping Spring

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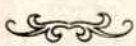

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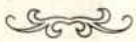
1923

McCormick's Creek Canyon State Park

A History *and* Description



By CHAS. G. SAUERS

PUBLICATION NUMBER 38
THE DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION
STATE OF INDIANA
DIVISION OF LANDS AND WATERS

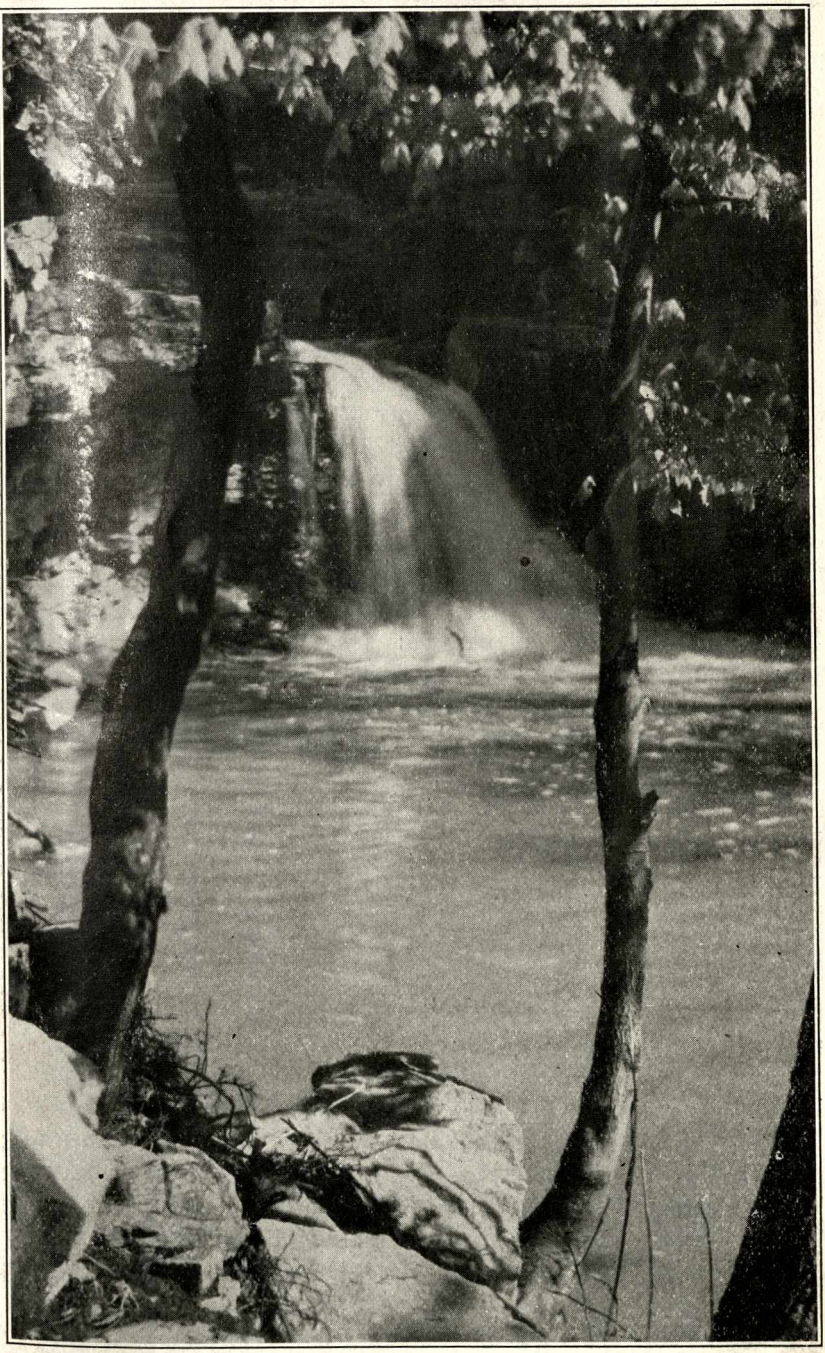
2-26084

IN Owen County, called by its natives "Sweet Owen", heralded by the pioneer as a region of potential agricultural wealth, but now noted more as the source of limestone, timber-lands and abounding in scenic and historic interests, is situated McCormick's Creek Canyon State Park, a reserve of about 400 acres. It lies adjoining that area known as "The Flatwoods District," bounded on one side by the west fork of White River, very rugged and cut through its greatest dimension by McCormick's Creek.

This park has all the charm of an unspoiled natural landscape despite the cutting of the virgin timber some years ago. The present timber is of such size as to lend an atmosphere of real woods. The topography is changing constantly as the hiker traverses the area. This is the sink hole country which abounds in bowl-shaped depressions of ranging depths, the only outlet being an orifice in the stone bottom, often completely hidden by silt. In the area are also great valleys, stretches of plateau, river bottoms and long, wooded slopes.

The area has long been viewed as a beauty spot and outing place. The following item is taken from the history of Washington Township written by William Richards and published in 1884:

"McCormick's Creek, which joins White River from the east about one mile east of Spencer, is a favorite resort for picnic parties and pleasure seekers, on account of its beautiful and romantic scenery. From its mouth to the falls, about one and a half miles, it winds through a deep, narrow, rocky valley, with precipitous sides and gray cliffs that rise like solid stone walls higher than the tall oaks. The bluffs and steep sides are covered with clambering vines and a dense timber growth, shutting out the sunlight and leaving the narrow valley shady, silent, and seemingly far from the haunts of man. The falls are twelve feet in height, and the surrounding scenery would delight the eye of an artist. The valley is in some places rocky, in others covered with grass and wild flowers and strewn with moss-covered boulders. The scene is one of wild sylvan beauty and grandeur, and it is perhaps



The Falls Enframed

the only spot the hand of the invading pioneer has left unchanged. It wants only the wild war whoop of the departed and disinherited Lo to wake the echoes in the enchanted vale and complete the scene as it was when the Indian was lord of the domain."

The timber growth is principally beech, oak, ash, sugar, walnut and poplar. The best timber has disappeared, but there were once magnificent forests of valuable timber.

The scenic feature of the park is the canyon from which the name is derived. About a mile southeast of the east boundary of the park a small, meandering, innocent appearing creek crosses the state highway with a shelf of flat rock for its bed. As it nears the park the bed becomes a shallow valley. Where it enters the park boundaries a ford crosses. At this point it begins to cut into the rock and within a half mile has deepened into a hundred-foot canyon. The canyon continues for more than a mile. It then melts into the bottom lands of White River and within a short space enters that stream at the foot of a large sand and gravel bar. Through many ages the little stream has merrily worked at its task and the stupendous results are awe-inspiring and unbelievable so that one looks at the brook with a feeling of suspicion. Those who see it on the rampage during time of freshets realize its power.

McCormick's Creek is named for John McCormick, Sr., who migrated to Indiana from West Virginia. The sons of John McCormick settled in the vicinity of the present park about 1833.

Shortly after the canyon has its beginning there is situated a falls twelve feet high. Just below the falls has been built a low dam from one wall to the other. Thus is formed a bathing pool which is accessible from the south side by a flight of steps cut into the rock. A raft is anchored in the middle. Here the visitors find ideal pastime in the sweltering months of July and August. It is hoped that at some time a series of low dams may be added so that the canyon will be a succession of pools for wading, swimming, and pleasure to the eye.

Entrance to the park is from State Highway No. 32, down a by-road to the entrance proper. Here lies a plateau upon which is situated the hotel, Canyon Inn, and service buildings. On the north of the building a broad lawn stretches away to

the edge of the woods, and roads and paths lead off to the various sections.

The park was purchased jointly by the people of Owen County and the State from the estate of Dr. Frederick Denkewalter. The following material was furnished by the son, Mr. Fred Denkewalter:

"Dr. Frederick William Denkewalter was a graduate of Rush Medical College. He studied in European colleges, clinics and hospitals.

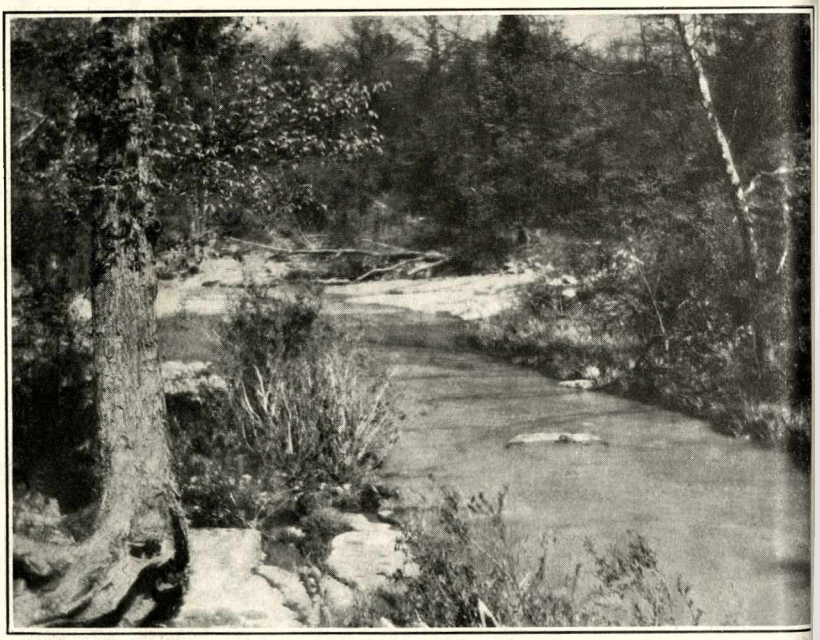
For many years he practiced medicine in Indianapolis where he owned a large business block, in which he also operated a drug store.

Suffering from the effects of a sun stroke, he determined to dispose of his Indianapolis holdings. Visions of a romantic youth turned his thoughts to nature. He learned that Owen County, Indiana, soils and climate were especially adapted to fruit growing. When the James A. Lehman 90 acres—the original McCormick's Creek tract—were shown to him he was so impressed with the scenic grandeur that in the fall of 1888 he bought the farm, determined to buy at any cost some additional 243 acres embracing the rest of the McCormick's Creek scenery. Thousands of fruit trees, evergreens, shrubs, etc., were planted.

In 1891 the Doctor bought the 34 acres which included the Upper Canyon, Falls and several free flowing springs. In 1901 he had purchased some 214 acres more, including the old State House quarry.

Back in 1888 he remodeled the old farm house and constructed his first sanitarium building. The treatments and romantic scenery soon attracted a wealthy clientele, until in 1893 he enlarged the buildings to the proportions as taken over by the State.

Dr. Denkewalter foresaw the future for McCormick's Creek. He sought in some way to make this estate a future home for his children—in particular the two daughters for whom he was especially solicitous. But the three sons drifted out into the business world. Although broken by disappointments, in his garden of sweet hope grew a wreath for each toil, a solace for every sorrow. Endless bliss would have filled his declining years had he known that this treasure, so lavishly bestowed by Mother Nature, would soon become a state park."



The Ford at the Beginning of the Canyon

The Canyon Inn

The hotel is the remodeled sanitarium of Dr. Denkewalter. When taken over by the State the frame building was a most terrifying hodge podge of rooms, stairways and open porches. To gain one room it might be necessary to go through three or four others. Hallways were evidently not in vogue at the time of its conception. The State worried along with this condition until the late summer of 1921, when this building was entirely remodeled into a livable, cheerful summer hotel. On the second floor are thirteen sleeping rooms and bath. The main floor has a lobby, large dining-room and the west a small wing for the custodian's family. On the south was added an entirely new one-story structure for kitchen and serving pantry. The building is electrically lighted.

By the summer of 1922 this inn had come into merited popularity as a stop-over and vacation resort. The establishment is maintained immaculately with plain, wholesome and well-cooked foods. Prices are held at a minimum so that this service may be available to the greatest number of people.

Leading east from the hotel, a woods road meanders over the easier grades to White River—about one mile away. The major part of this route is down a long, heavily wooded slope. It emerges from the woods at the bottom into a small, cleared valley. Fifty yards to the right is an abandoned quarry from which the foundation stone of the present State House was taken. The road now leads across McCormick's Creek, which has just left the mouth of the canyon, then some typical bottomland woods and out onto a great sand and gravel bar of White River. Remains of a wooden trestle are still discernible where a railroad once ran to the quarry.

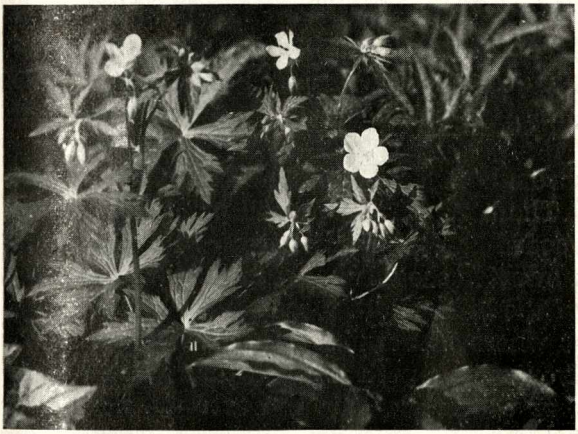
"The hills of Washington Township are full of splendid building stone, equal if not superior to any other in the State, and they will be some day studded with the tall derricks of many stone companies. A committee of experts, appointed to select the best stone to be found for the superstructure of the new State House, after a critical examination of the stone in various parts of Indiana and the West, selected that of the quarry at the mouth of McCormick's Creek.

A bridge was built across White River at this point, and a switch connecting with the Indianapolis and Vincennes Railroad was built by the contractors, and for some time the quarry was worked on an extensive scale. The bridge was

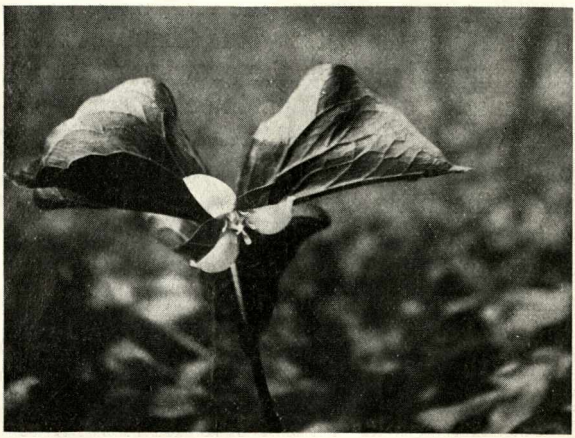
Dogwood
(Cornus florida)

Adder's Tongue
(Erythronium
albidum)

Wild Sweet
William
(Phlox
maculata)



Wild Geranium
(Geranium
maculatum)



Trillium
(Trillium
cernum)

Bloodroot
(Sanguinaria
canadensis)

twice washed away by floods, and the expense of quarrying this stone being greater than ordinarily, the contractor became discouraged and abandoned it for the cheaper but inferior stone of the Bedford Quarries." (From History of Owen County—1884.)

White River through Owen County has some of its finer scenic stretches. The bends are many and practically the entire course has wooded banks. Many acres of fine, tilled bottom lands stretch away to the hills. Again the river may flow at the very foot of the hills. Both types occur at the park.

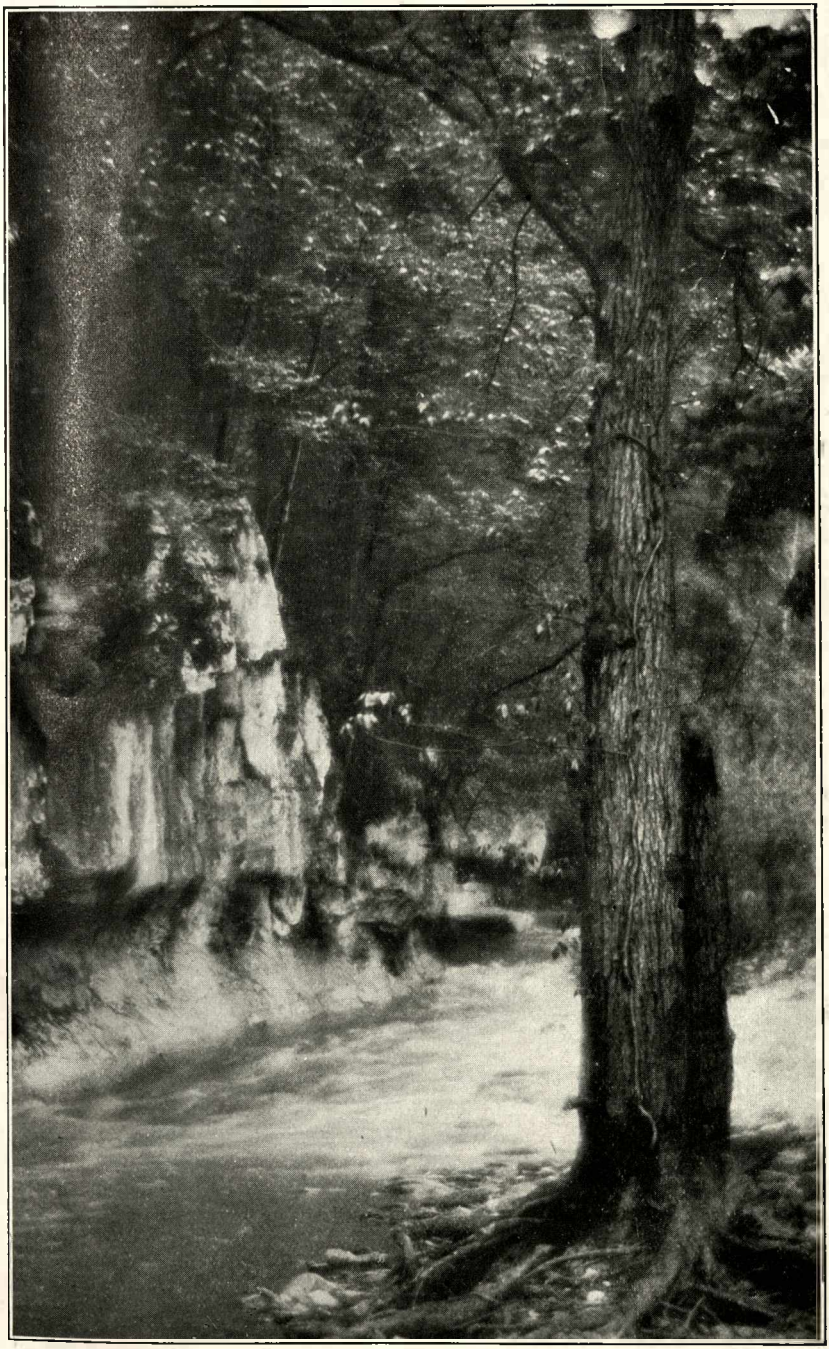
From the point where McCormick's Creek was crossed on the way to the river, runs a path through that section of the park lying north of the creek. On the extreme north is a beech woods—the trees of great size.

This path winds up the long slope past the little farm on the north of the park. This farm will be converted into large experimental plots in the growing of trees under the Division of Forestry of the Department.

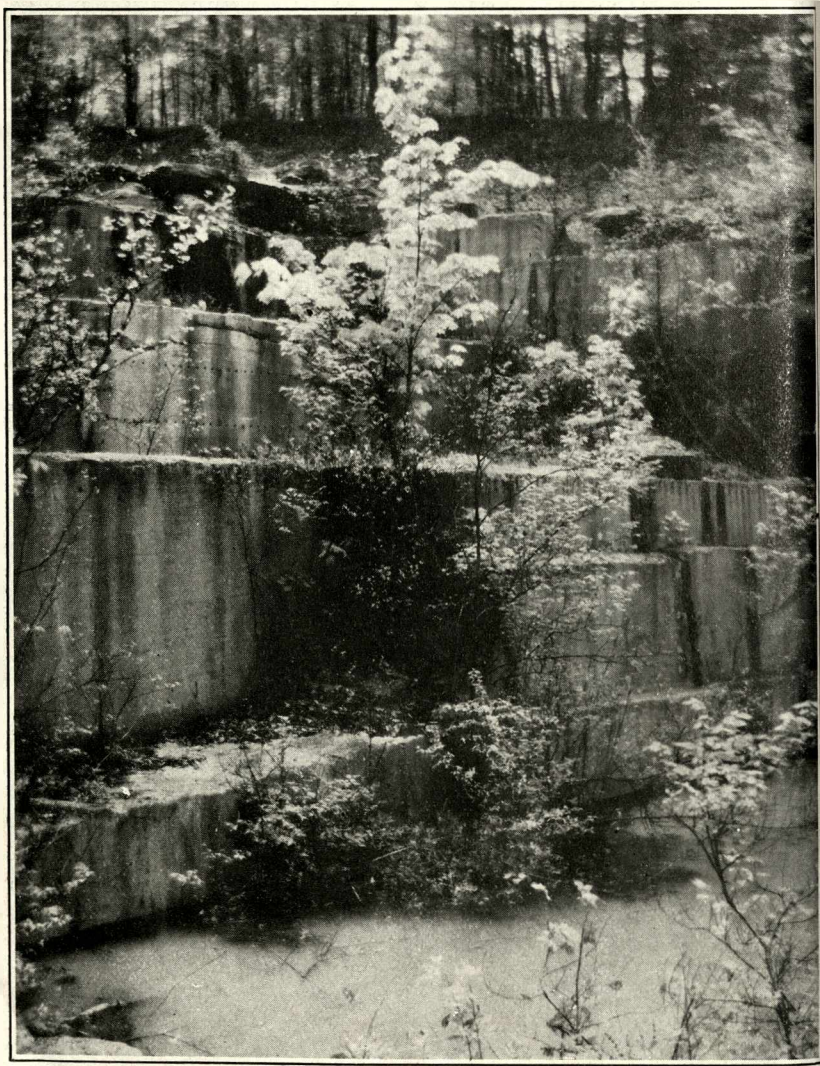
Having reached the beech woods at the extreme north edge of the highway one may then take the road leading south from the little farmstead; he will eventually find himself, after passing through a deep woods, at McCormick's Creek again on the extreme east edge of the park where the creek first enters the boundaries. At this point he may still follow the road or take the path leading over to the right which goes along the bank of the canyon, offering frequent delightful views.

One of the pleasantest trips in the park is to start at either the head or the mouth of the canyon and traverse its entire length along the bottom. Zest is added to this walk because the small stream must be crossed a number of times. There is always a possibility of somebody slipping and landing in the water, from which there is no danger.

McCormick's Creek Canyon has more wild flowers and in greater profusion than in any of the other state preserves. Beginning in April and running to the middle of May, great masses of blooms are to be found throughout the park. It has now become the practice of the Department to maintain during that time a nature guide who knows the flowers and birds for the instruction of visitors. A detailed description of the flowers to be found is listed in this publication under "Trees and Flowers of the Park", by Mr. Deam.



Showing the Beauty of the Rocky Walls



The State House Quarry

The Geology of McCormick's Creek Canyon

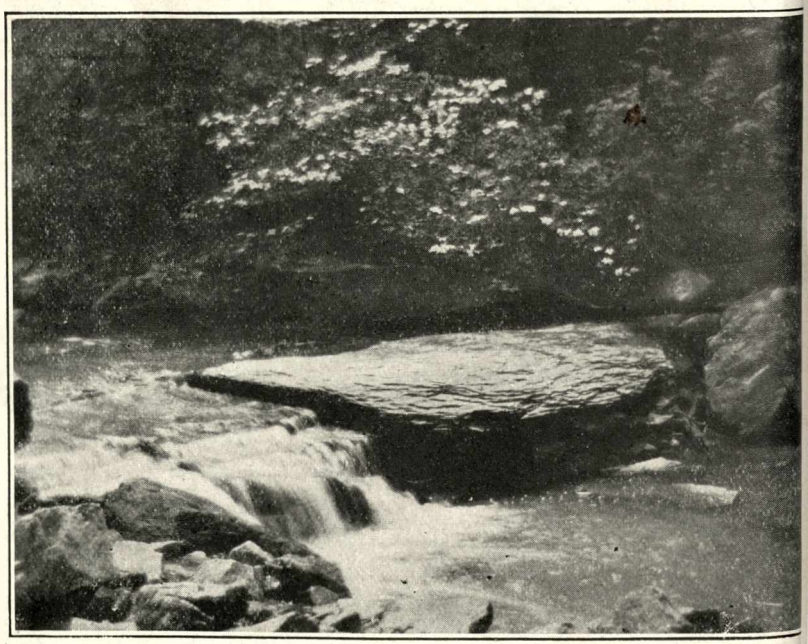
By Dr. W. N. Logan

The geological history of any spot on the earth's surface began with the earth's history. The geological history of McCormick's Creek Canyon Park as revealed by the rock strata began in that period of time Mississippian which preceded the great coal forming period of the eastern part of the United States. A part of this early history is told by the rocks in the canyon. We are told by them that this lowest revealed foundation of the park was formed by a limey accumulation in sea water. For long ages the waters of the sea covered the present site of the park. In this sea lived many animals which had limey skeletons or were protected by limey coverings. Many of these animals were of such small size that their shells are invisible to the unaided eye.

Later on the soft sediments deposited in this sea were consolidated into firm rocks and elevated into land. A long period of weathering and erosion followed, during which hundreds of feet of rock were removed from the then surface of the park. But the sea had not finished its work. It came in again and covered the eroded surface of the park with several hundreds of feet of rock. With the withdrawal of the sea the surface of the park was again made land, and again exposed to erosive and weathering processes. This period of erosion was very long, millions of years. During this long interval the life of the earth changed greatly. Finally when the plants and the animals began to take on modern characteristics there appeared in Indiana, and doubtless on the park, huge elephant-like creatures, called mammoths and mastodons.

While these animals were still in existence came the long winter, known as the glacial period, when a thick covering of ice rested over the larger part of Indiana. The front of this ice sheet crossed the park perhaps a little east of the hotel. White River and its valley and tributaries were filled with ice so that no water could drain into the river in the immediate vicinity of the park. So against the front of the ice a large lake covering many square miles was formed south and southeast of the park. The site of this glacial lake is known at the

An Interesting Time to Walk up the Canyon

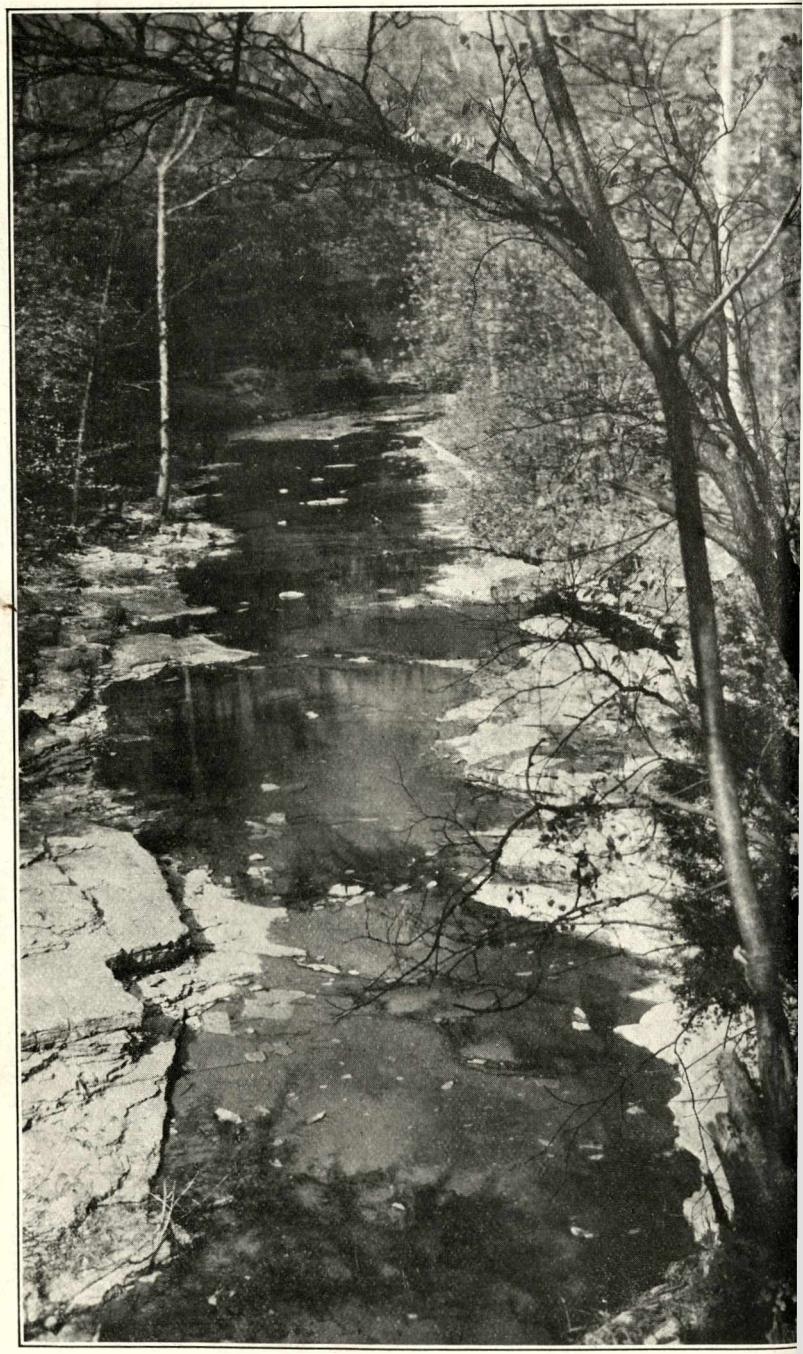


Dogwood in Canyon

"Flatwoods". For a time, it seems, this lake had no outlet. But when the ice front retreated up the White River the water from the lake first drained southward into Raccoon Creek, and later, with the further retreat of the ice, the water ultimately found its way northwestward along the present line of the canyon into a preglacial valley which it followed to White River. The water entered the old preglacial valley just a short distance below the present fall in the canyon. Only a small remnant of the great lake now remains to proclaim, by its flora, its former connection with the Ice Age. This remnant of the lake is known as "Stogsdill Pond", and is about two and one-half miles south of the park.

With drainage of the lake to the northwestward began the carving of the canyon. Steadily for tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of years the carving has gone on, for a longer period, perhaps, than that required for cutting the Niagara gorge.

There are a number of interesting geological features in the park. Among them is the old quarry in the Salem limestone from which the foundation stones of the old Capitol were taken. On the divide between the canyon and the river there are a number of circular depressions, sinkholes, which proclaim the presence of an underground drainage system developed by the solvent action of water on the limestone containing the fossilized remains of shell fish and other lime-forming animals. Some of these shells have been changed to a dark colored silica and stand out above the surface of the white limestone in which they were embedded. There are also layers of limestone composed of broken fragments of limestone which have been cemented together. These are called interformational breccias.



The Floor of the Canyon as Seen from the Top of a Cliff

Flowers and Trees of McCormick's Creek State Park

By Chas. C. Deam

The first to appear in the woods in the spring are the buckeye and wild cherry. The buckeye is very ornamental on account of its large clusters of greenish-yellow flowers. These appear (early in May) in great profusion at a time when most of the other trees are yet bare of leaves. The wild cherry with its long clusters of white flowers appear a few days later than the buckeye or with it. These perfume the woods, and when the fruit begins to ripen the branches are rarely free from some kind of bird that is looking for a juicy morsel of food.

The beech are always interesting in the early spring as they cast off the long brown protective leaf-bud scales to let the leaves out to clothe the gray branches with green. About the first of May the long tassels of flowers which appear with or when the leaves are about one-third grown are to be seen in great numbers. A small volume could be written on the beauties and uses of the beech. Aside from its beauty it is one of the granaries of the forest for chipmunk and other squirrels. Before the wild pigeon became extinct its nuts were its preferred food. The nuts also furnished mast for the razor-backs of the pioneers. Its shade furnishes a trysting place for lovers, as the initials and names carved on its bark testify. In the spring when it begins to take on its summer costume it furnishes a fine study in color tones of browns and greens.

The red and silver-leaf (both of which I have from this place) are really the first to flower. But their flowers are so inconspicuous as to be rarely observed, except after they have dehisced and fall to the ground. Yes, then there is the white and red elm that bloom just after the maples and before the leaves appear.

I would estimate that in the McCormick's Creek you may have 50 species of trees. Along the river you would have the cottonwoods, willows, soft maples, elms, sycamores, hackberries, and honey locusts. On the ridges you would have

the oaks and hickories. On the slopes and in the bottom you would have the black walnuts, butternuts, mulberries beeches, hickories, elms, ashes, pawpaws, tulip, sassafras sugar maple and basswoods. Of the smaller trees and shrub you would have the water beech, ironwood, redbud, blac haws, dogwoods, red haws, June berries, spice bush, wil roses, sumacs, wild crab apples and wild plums. Along th steep slopes of the creek you will find clumps of the wil hydrangea.

WILD FLOWERS

In the park you might be able to find about 500 species which, of course, would include ferns and weeds. I suspec 400 would be nearer the number that could be found, and pos sibly not that many. The total flora of an average count runs about 750, and it takes a county with a diversified topog raphy to have as many as 850.

About the first plant to appear is spring beauty, whic usually carpets the woodland with its white and pinkis flowers. Then cotaneously come some of the violets, crow foots, rue anemone, blood root, dog-toothed violets, phlox Greek valerian, Dutchman's breeches, squirrel corn, false ru anemone, white baneberry, pepper-root, liverwort, trillium larkspurs, etc.

As one passes down the canyon one can scan the slopes an in the talus of the cliffs he can see the shooting star and wit it and in the crevices of the rocks he can see the flaming re columbine. These two plants are of exceptional interest be cause both transplant so well to the wild gardens. Ordinaril in good soil the wild columbine spreads rapidly. Also on th slope can be seen the spiderwort with its blue flowers, whic begins to flower early and continues to flower for many week It also succeeds well when transplanted. In the summer th bellflower and the lobelias with their blue flowers, togethe with the many goldenrods with their yellow flowers, give colo to the woods. Then come the asters with many hues of blu and violet.

Sun, New Leaves and Water

Park Rules

To assist in keeping order in the Park and maintaining its beauty, the Department of Conservation has found it necessary to publish and enforce certain rules of conduct.

It is forbidden to pick ferns and wild flowers in the Park. They are one of the Park's chief beauties, and although the amount picked by one person seems small, the great number which would be taken away by the thousands who visit the Park makes the rule necessary.

Fires may only be built in places designated by the Park Superintendent. This rule is to prevent the great damage caused to trees by building fires near the base of the trunk or where the heat ascends and affects the branches.

It is requested that all waste paper and trash will be thrown into the large wire baskets which are provided for this purpose.

It is forbidden to deface the rocks and canyon walls by inscribing initials and figures upon them.

Automobiles will only be parked in the space provided. There is ample parking space, and if cars were allowed to park at any point the roots of trees would be damaged and the lawns would soon be gone, with a great loss to the beauty of the picnic grounds.

Each person entering the Park is charged an Admission Fee of Ten Cents. The fee is not large enough to prohibit anybody from coming, but at the same time the Department is largely dependent upon the funds from gate admissions for the maintenance of the Park. The money is used for a definite purpose in adding more comfort.

Visitors to the Park will assist greatly in observing these Necessary Rules, and their kindly co-operation will be greatly appreciated by the Department of Conservation.